Intentional pedagogy in the IZPD: Towards a meaningful educational practice

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Abstract

Traditional pedagogy tends to focus on content and the repetition of procedures, neglecting the reasons, purposes, and personal dispositions of learners. Intentional pedagogy proposes recovering the question of meaning: what do we want to achieve? why? what for? and placing the learner's intentionality at the center of the process. This article integrates intentional pedagogy with the Integral Zone of Proximal Development (IZPD)—which encompasses the dimensions of knowledge, power, will, and belief—to offer a practical teaching-learning framework. The principles of intentional pedagogy are defined: explicitness of purposes, alignment of intentions between educator and learner, design of meaningful tasks, and continuous reflection on the process. It is shown how the IZPD allows for diagnosis and action on the four dimensions from an intentional perspective, and examples are offered in handball, mathematics, languages, and vocational training. Intentional pedagogy based on the IZPD transforms the educator into a mediator who helps the learner answer the seven universal questions (what, why, what for, when, where, how, how much) and move from external intentionality (pressure, reward) to autonomous intentionality (genuine desire to learn).

Keywords: intentional pedagogy, Integral Zone of Proximal Development, intentionality, motivation, scaffolding, goal-oriented teaching.

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1. Introduction

Why do we learn what we learn? For what purpose? In everyday educational practice, these questions are often left implicit or taken for granted ("because it's in the curriculum," "because it will be on the exam later"). However, the human being is an intentional being: every conscious action is oriented towards an end, responds to a what for. Ignoring this dimension in teaching means acting as if learners were mere passive receivers, when in reality they are agents who interpret, desire, and anticipate.

Intentional pedagogy recovers the centrality of the question of meaning. Inspired by phenomenology (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty) and complex systems theory (Hilbert, 2016), it argues that teaching should help the learner explore, understand, and make their own the purposes of each activity. It is not only about "knowing and being able to do," but about "wanting to do" and "believing one can do it," with a clear direction.

On the other hand, the Integral Zone of Proximal Development (IZPD) (Mascarell, 2025) expands the Vygotskian concept by including four personal dimensions: knowledge, power, will, and belief. The IZPD provides a fine-grained diagnosis of what the learner needs to advance, but it does not itself indicate which direction to take. Intentional pedagogy provides that direction: not any progress is valid, but rather that which brings the learner closer to their goals (authentic or co-constructed).

This article aims to integrate both approaches into a practical framework for teaching-learning. The foundations of intentional pedagogy are defined, it is shown how the IZPD allows for its operationalization, and concrete examples are offered in different domains (handball, mathematics, languages, vocational training). The result is a person-centered proposal, focused on their intentions and on the adjusted help they need to fulfill them.

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2. Foundations of Intentional Pedagogy

2.1. Intentionality as a Basic Property of Living Beings

In previous works (Hilbert, 2016; Mascarell, 2018), living beings have been characterized as intentional agents: oriented towards ends, with the capacity for anticipation, and with an organization that responds to needs and interests. This intentionality can be conscious (when the subject reflects on their goals) or unconscious (in instinctive or habitual behaviors), but it is always present.

In human learning, intentionality takes on complex forms. A learner may have manifest intentions ("I want to pass," "I want to improve my shot") and latent intentions ("I want to be recognized," "I want to avoid shame"). The educator must work with both.

2.2. The Seven Questions of Intentionality

Every intentional action can be described by answering seven universal questions (Bayer, 1986; adapted):

1. **What?** The object or content of the action (what am I going to learn/do).
2. **Why?** The cause or triggering motive (why now, what need activates it).
3. **What for?** The ultimate purpose (what is it for, what benefit does it bring).
4. **When?** The moment, duration, and temporal sequence.
5. **Where?** The place, environment, or spatial context.
6. **How?** The procedure, strategy, or method.
7. **How much?** The magnitude, intensity, quantity, or frequency.

An intentional pedagogy makes these questions explicit and turns them into objects of shared reflection between educator and learner and a guide for action. It is not assumed that the learner answers them alone; they are helped to formulate them and find their own answers.

2.3. From External to Internal Intentionality

A crucial distinction is between imposed (external) intentionality and assumed (internal) intentionality. The former comes from authority, rewards, or punishments ("I study because I'm forced to," "I train because I want to win the trophy"). The latter is born from one's own desire, curiosity, or identification with the values of the activity ("I study because I'm interested," "I train because I enjoy improving").

Intentional pedagogy seeks to progressively internalize intentionality. It is not about eliminating external motives (which can be useful in initial phases), but about building bridges so that the learner finds their own reasons. The IZPD is the vehicle for this transition.

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3. The Integral Zone of Proximal Development as a Tool for Intentional Pedagogy

3.1. Reminder of the IZPD

The IZPD integrates four dimensions that must be considered simultaneously in teaching:

- **Knowledge:** declarative knowledge (knowing what) and procedural knowledge (knowing how).
- **Power:** technical, physical, or cognitive abilities to execute.
- **Will:** motivations, interests, goals, emotions linked to the task.
- **Belief:** self-efficacy expectations, attributions, beliefs about oneself and the domain.

Each dimension has its own zone of proximal development: what the learner does alone and what they can do with help in each one. Effective teaching must be situated within those zones.

3.2. How the IZPD Serves Intentional Pedagogy

Intentional pedagogy needs to know the learner's starting point in each dimension in order to guide them towards valuable ends. The IZPD provides that diagnosis. Furthermore, it offers the specific scaffolding to move the learner in the desired direction.

Dimension	Key Questions of Intentionality	Intentional Scaffolding
Knowledge	What do I need to know to achieve my purpose?	Help the learner identify relevant information, not all information.
Power	How can I execute the action? With what resources?	Design tasks that are within their power zone (neither too easy nor impossible).
Will	Why do I want to do this? What is it for?	Connect the task with the learner's personal goals; offer choices.
Belief	When and where can I succeed? Does it depend on me?	Create success experiences attributable to effort or strategy; model.

3.3. Intentionality as a Cross-Cutting Axis

Intentional pedagogy does not add a fifth dimension; it cuts across all four. It means that, in each dimension, the educator helps the learner become aware of their intentions and adjust them towards more autonomous and realistic goals. For example:

- In **knowledge:** it is not enough for the learner to know a rule; they must know what it is for and when to apply it (intentionality in the use of knowledge).
- In **power:** it is not enough for the learner to be able to execute a skill; they must want to execute it at the right time and believe they can do it under pressure.

- In **will:** explicit reflection on motives is worked on ("Do I really want this or do I want what comes with this?").
- In **belief:** the learner is helped to question limiting beliefs and build realistic but positive expectations.

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4. Practice of Intentional Pedagogy Based on the IZPD

Below, the practical steps for implementing this pedagogy in any learning domain are described.

4.1. Step 1: Make Initial Intentions Explicit (Shared Diagnosis)

Before beginning a learning sequence, the educator and the learner (or the group) engage in dialogue to answer the seven questions at their current level:

- "What do you expect to achieve in this session/module?"
- "Why are you interested (or not) in this topic?"
- "What do you think it will be useful for in the future?"
- "When and where would you like to apply what you learn?"
- "How do you prefer to learn? What help would you need?"
- "How much time or effort are you willing to dedicate?"

These responses provide a map of intentions that the educator will use to design the activities. If the learner's intentions are very external ("I just want to pass"), the educator will look for hooks to gradually internalize them.

4.2. Step 2: Design of Tasks with Intentional Meaning

Tasks should not be isolated exercises, but situations with purpose. Each task must explicitly answer the "what for." Examples:

- Instead of "solve these 10 equations," pose: "This equation represents the break-even point of a business. Find out from what quantity you start making money."
- Instead of "pass the ball to your teammate," pose: "The defender is anticipating your pass; how can you deceive them so that your teammate receives it alone?"

Furthermore, the task must be adjusted to each learner's IZPD across the four dimensions. If a learner knows the theory but does not believe they can do it, the task must ensure early success.

4.3. Step 3: Intentional Scaffolding During the Action

While the learner performs the task, the educator intervenes not only to correct executions but also to keep intentionality alive. Useful questions:

- "Are you doing what you wanted to do or have you deviated?"
- "Do you remember what we are doing this for?"
- "What could you change to get closer to your goal?"
- "Do you think you can achieve it? What do you need from me?"

The scaffolding is removed when the learner is able to ask themselves these questions.

4.4. Step 4: Post-Action Reflection on Fulfilled and Transformed Intentions

At the end of each session or phase, time is dedicated to reviewing intentions. Guiding questions:

- "Did you achieve what you wanted? If not, what got in the way?"
- "Has your initial idea changed? Do you now want something different?"
- "What did you learn about yourself (your abilities, your motivations, your beliefs)?"

This reflection closes the circle and prepares the next zone of proximal development. Intentions are not fixed; they can be transformed upon contact with experience.

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5. Applied Examples

5.1. Handball: Training Decision-Making in Passing

Context: Cadet team (14-15 years old). The coach observes that players always pass to the nearest teammate (implicit intention: safety) and do not take advantage of free spaces (desired intention: progression).

Application of Intentional Pedagogy with IZPD:

Step	Action
Diagnosis	The coach asks: "What are you trying to do when you pass? Why do you choose that teammate?" The players recognize that they seek not to lose the ball (avoidance intention). Their belief is explored: "If I pass far, it's more likely to fail."

Step	Action
Design	A task is proposed where passing to the far teammate is worth double points, and losing the ball is not penalized. The space is adjusted so that the far pass is feasible.
Scaffolding	The coach reminds before each attack: "Remember, today we want to take risks to improve. What is taking risks for?" During the game, they encourage: "That intention to look for the winger is exactly what we are practicing."
Reflection	At the end, they are asked: "Did you feel more insecure at the beginning? What happened afterwards? Did your idea about long passes change?"

Result: The players expand their repertoire of intentions. They move from "not losing" to "progressing." Their will and belief are transformed.

5.2. Mathematics: Solving Complex Problems

Context: 12-year-old students with resistance to facing non-routine problems (they believe they "are not good at that").

Application:

Step	Action
Diagnosis	The teacher asks: "What do you feel when you see a long problem? What do you think is going to happen?" The students express fear of failure and the belief that only the "smart" ones can do it.
Design	Start with a problem very similar to one already solved, changing only one piece of data. Ensure that most can solve it with a small hint.
Scaffolding	Before starting: "We are going to prove that you can too. The only difference with the problems you already know is this small twist. What is learning to twist things for?" During the resolution, they

Step	Action
	are asked: "What strategy did you use in the previous problem? Do you think it works here?"
Reflection	"What helped you not give up? Do you now believe you are capable of facing new problems?"

Result: The students internalize the intention to "persist" and modify their belief about their own competence.

5.3. Language Learning: Overcoming Oral Blockage

Context: A2-level adults who understand a lot but barely speak due to fear of making mistakes.

Application:

Step	Action
Diagnosis	The teacher investigates: "What prevents you from speaking? What happens if you make a mistake?" The students admit they fear ridicule (belief) and that their intention is "not to look bad" rather than "to communicate."
Design	A role-play activity is created where the objective is not grammatical correctness, but getting the other person to understand information (e.g., asking for directions). A playful and low-risk context is ensured.
Scaffolding	The teacher models errors and celebrates them as "signs that we are trying." Before speaking, they ask: "What do you want to say this for? What do you need the other person to understand?"
Reflection	"Did anyone laugh at your mistakes? What really happened? Is it worth trying even if it's not perfect?"

Result: Intentionality changes from "avoiding error" to "achieving communication." Students speak more and feel more competent.

6. Discussion: Challenges and Possibilities of Intentional Pedagogy

6.1. The Problem of Time and Curricular Pressure

A frequent objection is that making intentions explicit, dialoguing about them, and reflecting takes time that is often not available, especially in educational systems with overloaded curricula. The answer is that investing time in intentionality saves time later, because learners are more motivated, learn with more meaning, and require fewer repetitions. Furthermore, intentional reflection can be integrated into brief moments (2-3 minutes at the beginning and end) without subtracting hours of practice.

6.2. Educator Training in Intentional Pedagogy

Most educators have been trained in transmission or behaviorist models. Moving to intentional pedagogy requires changing the role from instructor to mediator, which is not easy. Training programs are needed that include: practice in formulating intentional questions, designing meaningful tasks, and working on educators' own beliefs about learners' capacity.

6.3. Resistance from Learners Accustomed to Passivity

When learners have been in systems for years where they were only asked to execute, they may initially feel uncomfortable if asked "what do you want to achieve?" or "what do you think this is for?" This is normal. The educator must be patient and gradually introduce reflection, starting with very concrete questions and celebrating any sincere response.

6.4. Evaluation of Intentionality

How to evaluate whether intentional pedagogy works? It is not enough to measure academic or technical results. An evaluation of intentional processes is needed:

- Percentage of times the learner initiates reflection on their own purposes.
- Change in responses to the seven questions over time (from external to internal responses).
- The learner's ability to adjust their intentions when encountering obstacles.

This can be done through reflective portfolios, periodic interviews, or rubrics of intentional autonomy.

7. Conclusions

1. Intentional pedagogy places the questions of meaning (what, why, what for, etc.) at the center of the teaching-learning process. It recognizes the learner as an agent with their own intentions that can be externalized, reflected upon, and transformed.
2. The Integral Zone of Proximal Development (IZPD), with its four dimensions (knowledge, power, will, belief), provides the diagnosis and scaffolding necessary to put intentional pedagogy into practice. Each dimension requires specific intentional treatment.
3. The practice of this pedagogy follows four steps: (a) explicitness of initial intentions, (b) design of meaningful tasks, (c) intentional scaffolding during the action, (d) post-action reflection on fulfilled and transformed intentions.
4. The examples in handball, mathematics, languages, and vocational training show that intentional pedagogy based on the IZPD is applicable in very diverse domains, improving not only results but also motivation, self-efficacy, and learner autonomy.
5. The challenges (time, training, initial resistance) are surmountable with gradual implementation and with a change in the educator's role towards mediation.

Finally, intentional pedagogy reminds us of something we often forget: learning is not only acquiring; it is also desiring, believing, and heading towards something worthwhile. Helping learners find that "something" is the noblest task of education.

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